

Global versus local HRM practices in the hospitality industry: the case of Greek luxury hotel managers

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the current HRM practices employed in the hospitality industry. More specifically it investigates four key HRM areas regarding the work of General Managers (GMs) in luxury (4 and 5*) hotels in Greece namely: recruitment and selection; training and development (focused in managerial competencies); performance evaluation; networking and communication. The dynamic and complex nature of the management function in hospitality business today and the realisation that what works effectively in one country may not be as efficient in another, has led management scholars and practicing managers in continuous efforts to enhance their understanding of this context and its effects on hotel managers. A key theme that emerges from this qualitative study is the critical role of the hotel's ownership status; it is also argued that both divergence and convergence contextual forces co-exist and shape the GMs' work in Greek luxury hotels.

1 INTRODUCTION

The fast growth of the international hotel chains since the early 1990s, has surfaced many challenges in managing hotel managers from an HRM perspective; opinions in this controversial area concentrating in two opposing poles: one view assumes that all managers should adopt the same practices and behave the same manner (the 'global' approach), while others suggest that contextual factors such as national and organisational culture, influence managerial work (Nickson 1998, Nickson & Warhurst 2001). From the early stages of internationalisation in the 1950s, a plethora of empirical studies (i.e. Nailon 1968, Hales & Nightingale 1986, Nebel & Ghei 1993) suggests that work in hotels poses multidimensional challenges for hotel unit general managers (GMs), especially in luxury establishments where there are tremendous pressures for service quality, customer satisfaction, effective people management and outstanding (financial) performance. Despite the plethora of studies on managerial work and the various HRM challenges in hotels, there is a lack of research on the influence of the national context in managerial work and HRM practices. Building on managerial work and comparative HRM studies, this paper argues that luxury hotel general managers (GMs) in Greece, face on-going HRM dilemmas in using similar practices with MNCs, and simultaneously behave differently than their international competitors due to a series of contextual factors such as the organisational structure, ownership status, local and national culture.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *Managerial work in hotels*

Since the early 1990s, the rapid growth of international hotel chains and its effects on managerial work, have drawn the attention of researchers (i.e. Gilatis & Guerrier 1994, Nebel et al. 1995, Gilbert & Guerrier 1997, Ladkin & Juwaheer 2000). In this globalised environment, the development of international hospitality managers is seen as being of critical importance for hospitality MNCs. The personality characteristics required of the international hotel managers include people and interpersonal skills, adaptability, flexibility and tolerance, cultural sensitivity and intercultural competence followed by emotional maturity, industry experience, and self-confidence (Gilatis & Guerrier 1994, Feng & Pearson 1999, Kriegl 2000). International etiquette, demonstrating an understanding of international business matters, the ability to work with limited resources and effectively manage stress were judged to be relatively important, while functional and technical skills were rated as the lowest priority for managers. Research also indicates that in an international hospitality organisation building managers' cross cultural skills may be far harder but more important than developing their functional and technical skills (Gilatis & Guerrier 1994, Kriegl 2000).

A consequence of the rapid internationalisation, were the efforts to establish generic competencies frameworks for hotel managers. The competencies movement in hotels appeared in the early 1990s, when a growing number of tourism and hospitality courses aimed to meet the demands of a volatile and

changing world (Umbreit 1993) took up the challenge to prepare students by developing and enhancing the management competencies and skills needed to operate successfully. This movement has been supported by the industry's growing demand for suitable qualified managerial staff. Research conducted to identify the right mix of competencies has used a number of frameworks like Katz's hierarchical competency model or Sandwith's (1993) competency-domain model, which builds on Katz's (1974) model and groups competencies into five areas (Conceptual-Creative; Leadership; Interpersonal; Administrative; Technical). It can be argued that the vast majority of the competencies models within the hospitality context (i.e. Tas 1988, Baum 1991, Lockwood 1993, Christou & Eaton 2000, Kay & Russette 2000, Brophy & Kiely 2002; Chung – Herrera et al. 2003) fall in the behavioural approach which assumes that those models can be universally applicable regardless the manager's background. This is no surprise as this industry is considered as 'results-oriented' and superior performance is believed to be the key to achieve organisational goals. Despite the economic significance and global spread of the international hospitality industry, the majority of hospitality management literature reflects what has happened in the US and the UK since the early 1980s. The ignorance of hospitality managerial work in different contexts has created a gap in the extant literature. Only recently have studies focused on what is happening in the rest of the Europe or the world (i.e. Christou & Eaton 2000, Agut et al. 2003, Brophy & Kiely 2002, Dimmock et al. 2003, Matheson 2004, Jauhari 2006, Blayney 2009). The most popular forms of research used to study the hospitality industry outside the Anglo-American context, is the use of country case studies (i.e. Kim 1994, Christou 1999, Agut et al. 2003) and studies within the context of the international hospitality business (D'Annunzio-Green 1997). Despite the relatively slow progress, hospitality research persistently reflects the Anglo-American universalist approach to management. Thus, it can be argued that the changes currently taking place in international hospitality management can be better understood under a cross-cultural management perspective, focusing in local differences.

2.2 *The Greek context*

The Greek and International literature suggests that Greek management has hardly existed until the early 1980s; all management practices and methods were largely adoption of MNCs practices. Kanelpoulos (1990) has documented a lack of wide diffusion of modern management methods and systems such as formal structures, planning and control systems, human resource management systems, incentive sys-

tems, and management information systems. Bourantas & Papadakis (1996) argue that the salient characteristics of Greek management (in the 1980s and early 1990s) were:

1. Concentration of power and control in the hands of top management.
2. Lack of modern systems to support strategic decisions.

A question that was raised here is whether Greek management possessed any unique characteristics that distinguish it from other European management styles (e.g., the institutionalised participation of employees in Germany or Sweden and the informal network relationships among small and medium-sized enterprises in Italy). The answer came during the 1990s and the early 2000s through the participation of the country in two international surveys: the Price Waterhouse Cranfield Project (CRANET) concerning Human Resources strategies and policies across Europe (Papalexandris & Chalikias 2002); and the GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organisational Behaviour Effectiveness) project which provided useful insights for each participative country cultural perspectives in relation to management and leadership (Javidan & House 2001). The findings of these significant surveys indicated the country's differentiation in management practices, due to the existing socio-cultural context.

The results from the CRANET survey revealed that in Greece, as in other European countries, there is evidence of both convergence and divergence in HRM policies and the overall work context (Myloni et al. 2004). The GLOBE project has provided a better insight of the relation between management practices and national culture in Greece. Papalexandris et al. (2002) found that despite the paternalistic family oriented management style there are indications for a strong will to change. Figures from the GLOBE project (House et al. 2002) show that Greece has low mean scores in 'society as is' and higher scores in 'society should be'; these results confirm the existence of a culture gap found also in previous research studies in Greek organisational culture. According to Bourantas & Papadakis (1996), there is a discrepancy between general organisational culture as perceived by managers and their personally preferred culture. This is considered to be an indication of the desire for change within organisations. The greatest pressures for convergence are coming from the obligations of Greece as a member of the E.U. and several other organisations that require planning ahead and efficient management of the various projects. While this affects mostly the public sector, globalisation put pressures for uniform management practices and policies in private sector organisations. Thus, a slow but steady movement towards harmonisation of management practices at least with the rest of the E.U. members is observed.

3 RESEARCH PROFILE

This research was conducted as part of a PhD Thesis and served mainly two aims: first to explore the HRM practices used to help GMs' exercise their roles and competencies in Greek 4 and 5* hotels; and second to investigate the interplay between context and HRM practices regarding managerial work. In total 16 hotels with 32 participant senior managers (16 GMs and their immediate assistants) were chosen – representing 4 and 5* in Athens, Thessaloniki, Rhodes and Crete. The 16 establishments selected for this research, represent two broad hotel types operating in Greece – city and resort. Basic prerequisite for the participant hotels was to be holders of 4 or 5* official rating that is accredited by the Greek Chamber of Hotels. The ownership status of each hotel (family; local chain; national chain; multinational chain) was also considered. The luxury hotels in the selected geographical regions were then shorted / filtered by using the following two criteria:

I. As a minimum standard the city hotels should provide TV and air conditioning in room and, restaurant and parking facilities. Additionally for resort hotels they should have outdoor swimming pool.

II. All participant hotels should have more than 150 rooms. This happened in order to ensure that only medium to big companies would participate in this research. This aimed to: a) compare hotels with similar organisational structure, and b) allow replication in other European countries with similar size and structure hotels.

The hotel selection process followed in this research was dictated by the structure of the luxury hotel industry in Greece: given its nature and geographical spread (approximately 1,150 establishments all over Greece) a decision was made to limit the destinations in the most representative and popular places for city and resort hotels respectively. A three-part tool followed by a cover letter explaining the aim of the interview was used, in order to serve the needs of the research. The first part examined demographic data of the company and the participant; the second part was a 14 question semi-structured in-depth interview; and the third part was the Personal Competencies Framework (PCF) Questionnaire, originally developed by Dulewicz & Herbert (1999). Additional qualitative data sources derived from non-participant observation (field notes) and company documents including job descriptions, standard operating procedures (SOPs), brochures and staff newsletters. A major methodological concern for this study was to produce valid and reliable outcomes. A research protocol was used as recommended by Yin (2003). The case study protocol contains procedures and general rules that should be followed in using the research instrument/s and is considered essential in a multiple-case study (Yin,

ibid.). It was created prior to the data collection phase. In addition, during the data collection tests for the quality of research were employed (Construct and External Validity, Reliability); these tests were followed by the use of two different triangulation methods namely Data and Methodological triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln 2003).

4 THE RESEARCH FINDINGS: THREE TYPES OF LUXURY HOTEL GMS

Three different managerial profiles in luxury hotels in Greece emerged from this research, regarding the key HRM areas used to help GMs develop their managerial roles and competencies. The first labeled the 'native' GM, is employed in family and local hotel chains, which represent the vast majority of Greek 4 and 5* hotels (Hellenic Chamber of Hotels 2007). This is a typical SMTE (small-medium tourism enterprise) owned and essentially co-managed by the leader of the family surrounded by relatives in various positions. Then, the 'glocal' GM, is found in Greek national hotel chains; this type of hotel is a former family business – led very often by a charismatic founder – which expanded gradually its operations nationwide. In addition, this type of hotel has adapted to a certain degree the organisational structure and standards of a multinational hotel chain; there is still however moderate involvement of the owner (or his family) to the management of the company. Finally, the 'Greek global' GM, is found in multinational hotel chains; this hotel type is a foreign brand name, franchised in most of the cases by a Greek businessman. There are only a few cases that the management of the company belongs to the parent company. In this type of hotel, the organisation, structure and standards are dictated by the parent company; there are however some variations / deviations due to the Greek socio-cultural context. For example, the standard operating procedures are adapted to the local working patterns and legislation.

The 'native' GMs are males between 55-65 years old, speaking on average two foreign languages and have at least a hospitality first degree. Employers in this category are in favour of the 'old school' (over 50-55 years old) for two main reasons: they value more the experience, reputation and seniority than qualifications; in addition 'near retirement' GMs may cost less in the payroll. The recruitment is conducted mainly through recommendations and 'word of mouth', and rarely with internal recruits; the selection process is usually conducted by the owner and in most of the cases is based in subjective criteria (i.e. personal references, reputation and salary). There are limited options for training and development in this type of hotel, and very often is up to the GMs' discretion to recommend which programme to attend. In most of the cases, there is no time allocat-

ed for training and development activities, in the GMs daily schedule. The job roles performed by the GMs are focused on what Mintzberg (1973) describes as 'figurehead', the person who is there to inspire and lead the staff; they also find the time to communicate with customers and listen carefully to their views. The communication competencies are perceived as the most valuable for successful operations and management. Thus, high contact intensity with various stakeholders (i.e. owner, subordinates, suppliers, customers) is a key aspect of managerial work. GMs in family hotels go through an informal performance evaluation – in most of the cases conducted by the hotel owner – based primarily on the overall financial performance, and secondarily the levels of customer satisfaction and quality. This type of GMs puts great emphasis in networking, and they work very hard to build networks and a good reputation on the local/regional/national market. Their overall relations with the owners can be described as 'tolerable' since the GMs are often faced with unrealistic demands on behalf of the owners. Overall, the level of the owner's involvement (and his/her family) in the GMs' work in most of the cases is high (Hofstede 1980, Trompenaas 1993). The Greek context is dominant here, with the 'in-group collectivism' dimension to dictate the relationships between the owner, the GM and their subordinates (Papalexandris 2008).

On the other hand, 'glocal' GMs employed in national and franchised MNC hotel chains, are males between 45-55 years old, speaking on average two foreign languages and have very good educational attainment including a hospitality first degree and postgraduate studies. This professional background includes the 'primary' departments of a medium/big size hotel (Food and Beverage, Front Office - Reservations); in addition, sales, finance and contracting background is a prerequisite for this type of GMs. GMs' recruitment is conducted through personal recommendations or internal candidates with experience in various hotels of the chain; 'head hunters' are rarely used for high profile candidates. Since the recruitment process does not involve a large number of candidates, two or three selection interviews take place with senior managers from/in the Head Office; during the final interview the owner is also present. Throughout the year there are moderate opportunities for training and development; the GMs are free to choose between in-house or outsourced programmes, in Greece and/or abroad. Their job roles are focused on leadership (employee motivation / inspiration) and entrepreneurship (help business grow). The leadership competencies is their primary concern, they value however the remaining managerial competencies (PCF) as integral parts of their competencies framework (Chung – Herrera et al. 2003). This is reflected in their performance evaluation, a formal procedure that takes place once or

twice a year depending on the type of the hotel unit (city-resort). The primary targets are mainly financial and the maintenance of high quality standards; there is however a reference to the 'performance' of the GMs in areas such as communication, leadership and inter-personal relations. The GMs 'secondary' competencies are evaluated through peer reviews, customer satisfaction questionnaires and 'mystery guest' audits. Although there is intense networking activity within the corporate limits, GMs maintain their contacts outside the company; in addition, their reputation is mostly heard within the corporate limits. The owners – who in most of the cases occupy the position of the managing director or chairman of the board – have a moderate to low involvement in the GMs' work, mainly at strategic level. There are however cases of interventions in GMs' work when owners have personal interest, i.e. they 'strongly recommend' the selection of a particular candidate. It is important to note here that the owners know personally all of their GMs, and maintain regular communication. High contact intensity with key stakeholders inside (owner, senior managers, immediate subordinates, repeating clientele) and outside (local authorities, tour operators) the hotel unit is deemed critical for the manager's job. It can be argued that, in this type of business Greek context meets corporate culture: the Greek hotel national chains are structured and managed according to the multinational hotel chain model; the Greek context is however evident everywhere and it is very often the case that 'favours' and deviations from the standards occur when is about relatives or friends (Broome 1996, Fukuyama 1995, Triandis et al. 1968). On the other hand, it can be argued that this type of business has embodied the Greek context characteristics in the best way, so their GMs can use it in order to improve performance and efficiency.

The 'Greek global' GMs, are middle aged (45-55 years old) males with impeccable educational background. They speak on average two languages - including the hotel chain's parent country language (in case it is not English). Their professional background includes a sales and finance orientation, although they understand hotel operations very well. The recruitment is conducted internally or through the use of 'head hunters' who are aiming at high profile recruits. The selection process is rigorous and involves at least three interviews. There are many opportunities for training and development in Greece and abroad on a regular basis. The GMs' roles in this type of hotels are focused in entrepreneurship and finance – based on Mintzberg's (1973) typology, decisional roles. Their annual performance evaluation is multi-dimensional, lots of emphasis is put however in achieving agreed (financial) targets.

Table 1: The GMs' profiles in Greek 4 and 5* hotels

| Manager & Company Type | The 'Native' GM (Family /Local Chain) | The 'Glocal' GM (GR National Chain &MNC franchised) | The 'Greek Global' GM (MNC managed) |
|--------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Average Age | 55-65 | 45-55 | 45-55 |
| Sex | Male | Male | Male |
| Education | HE Graduates | HE Graduates & Postgraduate Education | HE Graduates & Postgraduate Education |
| Professional Background | All Departments (Emphasis in F&B) | All Departments (Emphasis in Finance, Sales & Contracting) | All Departments (Emphasis in Finance, Sales & Contracting) |
| Recruitment & Selection | Recommendations | Head Hunters & Internally | Head Hunters & Internally |
| Training & Development | Sporadic – GMs' own discretion | Moderate to High Opportunities | High Opportunities |
| Job Roles | "Figurehead" | Leader & Entrepreneur | Leader & Entrepreneur |
| Competencies | Emphasis in Communication | Leadership | Results Orientation & Leadership |
| Performance Evaluation | Informal Annual | Formal Annual (1 or 2 times) | Formal Annual (1 or 2 times) |
| Role of Networking | High | Moderate outside High inside | Low outside High inside |
| Role of reputation | High in local /national market | High in national marker | High in regional / international market |
| Ownership level of involvement | High to Moderate | Moderate to Low | Low |
| Role of Culture | High | Moderate | Moderate to low |

This corresponds to their preference in the results-orientation competencies cluster. Networking is very important within the corporate limits; outside these limits the GMs maintain only those contacts necessary to 'do the job'. Their reputation is synonymous with hard work and what is actually on their resume. The Greek culture is something that they cannot ignore –especially in the case of foreigners – the corporate culture however is this, which determines their behaviour. The above profile refers to Greek nationals working in managed Multinational hotel chains. The fact that a such a small number of foreign nationals work as luxury hotel GMs in Greece (less than ten in 2007) may lead to the following arguments: first that a pool of Greek GMs who satisfy the high standards of the multinational hotel chains exists in the country; and second that

the Greek context is posing difficulties that foreign nationals cannot cope with (Broome 1996). Table 1 summarises the findings of this research in relation to managerial roles and competencies; the three different profiles identified for Greek luxury hotel GMs are not exclusive and provide a generic context for discussion in this field.

5 CONCLUSION

This paper unearths the importance of contextual variables in managerial work, and demonstrates that there are alternatives to the use of universal (standard) management practices. More specifically the influence of the Greek context on managerial and HRM practices for luxury hotel GMs was explored and explained. There are strong indications that the Greek context affects to a large extent managerial work in family and local chain hotels; on the other hand national hotel chains rely on international standards and practices and exercise management in a manner that incorporates both local and international influences. Multinational hotel chains are pre-occupied from strong corporate cultures, which prevent the infiltration of any local/national culture influence. Based on the research findings, three distinctive groups of luxury hotel GMs were identified: the 'native' GM; the 'Glocal' GM; and the 'Greek Global' GM. This research provides evidence for the reasons behind the use of different HRM practices between different types of luxury hotel managers, based on the local culture influences. The wider theoretical contributions include insights on managerial work, HRM and the interplay between managerial work and context.

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